

FEATURE

CHRISTMAS 2013: MEDICAL HISTORIES

“Compulsive plague! pain without end!” How Richard Wagner played out his migraine in the opera *Siegfried*

Carl Göbel and colleagues explain why listening to Wagner might give you a headache

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The medical problems of composer and poet Richard Wagner have been widely investigated. He is known to have had functional disorders, skin disorders, acute infections, and minor ailments, as well as heart disease.¹⁻⁴ However, the condition that Wagner described as the “main plague of his life”⁵ was recurring headaches. The details presented in his writings and letters⁵⁻⁷ as well as the numerous diary records of his second wife, Cosima,^{8 9} confirm that Wagner had a severely disabling migraine disorder producing frequent migraine attacks, sometimes with aura.¹⁰ Here, we show how Wagner deeply interwove his migraine attacks and auras into his music and libretti, using the opera *Siegfried* (1876), the third part of the *Ring Cycle*, as an example.

Musical depiction of migraine

The first scene of act 1 of the opera *Siegfried* provides an extraordinarily concise and strikingly vivid headache episode. The music begins with a pulsatile thumping, first in the background, then gradually becoming more intense. This rises to become a directly tangible almost painful pulsation (fig 1⇓). While the listener experiences this frightening headache sensation, Mime is seen pounding with his hammer, creating the acoustic trigger for the musically induced throbbing, painful

perception. At the climax Mime cries out: “Compulsive plague! Pain without end!”

Wagner carves out the temporal and qualitative aspects of the headache phenotype in astonishing detail. This has also been recognised by renowned opera stage directors. In Anthony Pilavachi’s stage direction of *Siegfried* at Theater Lübeck (2009), Mime explicitly experiences a severe headache. The musical description of migraine is strengthened by Mime’s painful facial expression, the way he holds his trembling head, and ultimately by avoiding movement and resting on the floor (fig 2⇓). Similarly, in Claus Guth’s *Siegfried* stage direction at Hamburg State Opera (2009), Mime takes an overdose of aspirin tablets in a desperate attempt to relieve the pain (fig 3⇓, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJbD2Ck0pRY).

In his memoirs, Wagner gives an account of the symptoms he had in September 1856 when he was composing these bars. The words show a marked phonophobia⁵:

I began to sketch the overture [of *Siegfried*] on September 22. That time one of the main plagues of my life arose, causing critical distress. A tinker had established himself opposite our house, and stunned my ears all day long with his incessant hammering.

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Video on bmj.com (see also <http://bmj.com/video>)



In my disgust at never being able to find a detached house protected from every kind of noise, I was on the point of deciding to give up composing altogether until the time when this indispensable condition should be fulfilled.

In a letter to Franz Liszt on 27 January 1857,⁶ Wagner voiced the suffering and disability caused by the “nervous headaches” he had while working on *Siegfried*:

My health, too, is once more so bad, that for ten days, after I had finished the sketch for the first act of *Siegfried*, I was literally not able to write a single bar without being driven away from my work by most tremulous headaches. Every morning I sit down, stare at the paper, and am glad enough when at least I get as far as reading Walter Scott. The fact is, I have once more over-taxed myself, and how am I to recover my strength? With *Das Rheingold* I got on well enough, considering my circumstances, but *Die Walküre* caused me much pain. At present my nervous system resembles a pianoforte very much out of tune, and on that instrument I am expected to produce *Siegfried*. Well, I fancy the strings will break at last, and then there will be an end. We cannot alter it; this is a life fit for a dog.

Scintillating aura

An example of the musical depiction of the visual disturbances of a typical migraine aura can also be found in act 1, scene 3 of *Siegfried*. It is introduced by a scintillating, flickering, glimmering melody line with an underlying zigzag pattern, which integrates the previously mentioned “migraine leitmotif” (fig 4). Mime, irritated, sings: “Loathsome light! Is the air aflame? What is it flaring and flashing, glittering and whirling, what is swirling and whirling there and flickering around? It glistens and gleams in the sunlight’s glow. What is it rustling and humming and blustering there?”

The text expresses typical visual disturbances seen in a migraine aura. The music illustrates this further by imitating scintillations and continuously extending visual disturbances, characteristics of a typical migraine aura. In Anthony Pilavachi’s Lübeck production (2009), the scene is intensified by flickering light, from which Mime tries to turn away in pain.

An analysis of the perceived scintillation rate of migraine aura with an objective task reported that the rate of flicker averages 17.8 Hz.¹¹ Wagner composed these bars in two-four time, and the string instruments responsible for the musical scintillation (violins and violas) play 16 demisemiquavers per bar. This

corresponds to 16 Hz at an assumed tempo of 120 beats per minute, close to the experimentally determined rate of flicker during a migraine aura. Most conductors choose a slightly slower tempo, but in the rehearsal remarks for the *Siegfried* premiere in 1876, Wagner gives clear instructions for faster tempi to conductor Hans Richter: “If you were not all such tedious fellows *Das Rheingold* would be finished within two hours.”¹² The experimentally determined flicker frequency in migraine probably also gives important clues about the performance speed that Wagner intended.

Wagner thought the completed act 1 of *Siegfried* exceeded all expectations.¹³ However, he had to interrupt his work a year later in the middle of the second act. In a letter to Otto Wesendonck on 22 December 1856, Wagner writes:

I fear soon everything will leave me—eventually also my desire to work. I cannot motivate myself for *Siegfried* anymore, and my musical sense, just like my mood, is falling into gloom. Everything appears truly flat and superficial! Do not just think of my loneliness, my health is also heavy and leaden.

The interruption lasted a total of 12 years—act 2 was completed in 1864, and it was 1871 before Wagner finally completed the opera. The premiere took place in Bayreuth on 16 August 1876.

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Figures

Fig 1 “Migraine headache leitmotif” in *Siegfried*, act 1, scene 1

[Image: PETRUCCI INTERNATIONAL MUSIC SCORE LIBRARY PROJECT]



Fig 2 Anthony Pilavachi’s stage direction of *Siegfried* at Theater Lübeck (2009) shows Mime as a laboratory scientist whose hammering leads to an intense headache

[Image: JÖRG METZNER]



Fig 3 Claus Guth's stage direction at Hamburg State Opera (2009) shows Mime (left) in bed with headache tablets and water within reach

[Image: MONIKA RITTERSHAUS]

Dritte Scene.
(♩ = ♩) Dreitaktig.

Kl. Fl.
Hob.
Cl. (in B.)
1^{te} Viol. 1. 2. 3. 4 u. 5. Pult.
2^{te} Viol. 1. 2. 3. 4 u. 5. Pult.
1^{te} u. 2^{te} Viol. 6. 7 u. 8. Pult. zus. 6 Pulte.
Br.
Ve.
Cb.
Bs. Tub. 1. (in B.)

MIME. (Erstiert, grad' vor sich aus, in den sonnig beleuchteten Wald hinein, und geräth zunehmend in heftiges Zittern.)
Verfluch. tes Licht!
Was fläunt dort die

★ (An jedem Pulte nur die ersten Spieler.)

Fig 4 "Migraine aura leitmotif" in *Siegfried*, act 1, scene 3 uses a scintillating melody line with an underlying zig-zag pattern

[Image: PETRUCCI INTERNATIONAL MUSIC SCORE LIBRARY PROJECT]